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AUTHOR Wolf, Mary Alice
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ABSTRACT

Through in-depth interviews, the motivation and experience of 40 Elderhostel participants, aged 60 to 80, were studied and personal stories were collected. This information was analyzed within the framework of relevant psychosocial and gerontological theory and research. The findings identified some general characteristics of the population, including cohort and occupational similarities. Three case studies explored individual experiences related to education and motivation for learning in late life. The three persons interviewed in depth are motivated by a desire to learn, to complete their education, and to make sense out of older age. These individual stories reflect a diversity of motivations within the population. The study concluded that since the quality of life for older persons can be greatly enhanced through participation in education, adult education researchers should explore the meaning of education for this growing population. (33 references) (KC)

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OLDER LEARNERS: INNER REFLECTIONS

by

Mary Alice Wolf, Ed.D.

Director, Institute in Gerontology

and

Associate Professor, Human Development/Gerontology

Saint Joseph College

West Hartford, Connecticut

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Abstract

OLDER LEARNERS: INNER REFLECTIONS

This study explores the motivation and experience of a group of older adult learners. Through in-depth interviews, forty Elderhostel participants were studied; personal stories were collected. These reflections were analyzed within the framework of relevant psychosocial and gerontological theory and research. The findings include some general characteristics of the population, including cohort and occupational similarities. Three case studies are discussed and verbatim interview data are presented to explore individual experiences related to education and motivation for learning in late life. These individual stories, however, reflect a diversity of motivations within the population. As the quality of life for older persons can be greatly enhanced though participation in education, it behooves adult education researchers to explore the meaning of education for this growing population.

The American population grows older. Between 1970 and 1990, the number of adults over sixty increased by 18% while the total population increased by 5%. There are an estimated 20 million Americans currently over the age of sixty, a number expected to double in the next twenty years (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1989). Concurrently, the variety and number of educational programs offered to older adults have increased steadily since the enactment of Title II-B of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Older Americans Act of 1965 (Lowry & O'Connor, 1986; Moody, 1988).

Innovative programs have developed in traditional liberal arts curricula, leisure-time arts and crafts activities, physical education experiences, and Adult Basic Education (ABE). Researchers are gathering information on the education of older persons and its impact on their lives (Brady, French, & Peck, 1989; Courtenay, 1989; Cross, 1981; Lowry & O'Connor, 1986; Okun, 1977; Peterson, 1985; Wolf, 1985b, and others).

Insights into Motivation for Late-Life Learning

The motivation and experience of older adult learners are of particular interest. Demographic surveys indicate that the average fifty-year-old in 1990 can expect to live thirty more years and many of these elders will seek educational experiences in formal and informal settings. Researchers are attempting to identify the motivational characteristics that cause older persons in ever increasing numbers to seek learning programs.

At the same time, they are aware that future elders will most certainly differ from the current cohort; elders will come into learning places with higher educational and socioeconomic levels (Palmore, 1976, 1988), more vocational and post-retirement instrumentalism (Sterns, 1988), and better overall health (Palmore, 1986, 1988). Why will elders continue to seek learning? How can educators better understand the meaning this learning has for them?

For some time, gerontologists have stressed the necessity of studying older persons who are autonomous and community-dwelling rather than institutionalized (Butler, 1963), and who are engaged in activities. Neugarten stated:

> especially needed are investigations in which small samples of adults are studied in detail. . .Studies that would be particularly valuable are those in which respondents. . .give introspective accounts of the cognitive strategies they employ. . .(1973, pp. 311-335)

It behooves researchers in adult education to explore the practices of older adults who choose to engage in learning activities, to ask for personal educational histories, and to ask what meaning the learning activities have for them.

The Study: Inner Reflections

Method of Inquiry

Grounded in qualitative methodology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Glaser & Straus, 1967; Merriam, 1988, 1989) this study explores the personal stories of a population of older adults (N 40) at a recent summer Elderhostel program at a university in the Northeast. By means of in-depth interviews, biographical constructs related to education and personal development are explored. The methodological underpinning of the study came from the theories of Alfred Schutz (1967), who differentiated between the "because of" motives--those lifelong constituent factors in our histories that continue even now to motivate us--and the "in order to" motives--the immediate purpose we hope to achieve when we act. As the nature of the information sought was highly subjective, the research paradigm was exploratory, focusing on lifeways and personal perspectives.

In-depth interviews afford researchers the opportunity to learn of the inner meaning that experience has in the world of the study participant (Schutz, 1967; Merriam, 1988). By analyzing content, the researcher can identify thematic redundancy (Glaser & Straus, 1967). A theory of motivation was developed through this process, for, individual circumstances notwithstanding, many of the older learners expressed similar concerns. These included the meaning of time in late life, goals for learning throughout adulthood, definitions of "learning," concerns about memory, choice of curricula, criteria for "good teachers," and unfinished personal lifelong agendas.

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Developmental Mandates

Educators have been provided with new insights into lifelong psychosocial developmental mandates throughout the lifespan (Boucouvalas & Krupp, 1989; Wolf, 1985a, 1985b). Central to an understanding of older persons is Erik Erikson's (1963) theory that adults develop in hierarchical fashion so that late life interests can be seen as indicators that people are working on "tasks"--either tasks which were delayed or "current" tasks which may lead to ego integrity, late life maturity. Older persons may choose education to explore late life social and psychological growth or to rework previously incompleted stages (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1981; Moody, 1988, Peskin & Livson, 1981; Wolf, 1985b). Thus, education can contribute to personal development (Havighurst, 1961; Knowles, 1970).

This study explored the relationship between the Elderhostel participants' experience of learning and their discussions of personal constructs. While there were 40 participants and as many themes of development and growth, the results indicate that several basic motives for continued learning exist. Some of the stories that Elderhostel participants tell are recorded in the following section to illustrate the spectrum of personal concerns and lifeways of the full Elderhostel population (N=40).

Rita

Rita and her husband Ben are retired. Both high school graduates, their yearly income is $30,000. Rita says:

> I'm 64-years old. My husband is here with me, enjoying the weeks at the Elderhostel program. I have two married children--daughters--who are quite well

> educated. I'm sorry that I've wasted so much time in my life and not gotten further education. I finished high school and went to work and got married. Off and on, I've been going to work, staying home with the children, etc., but it just didn't dawn on me once I'd started to work that I could go back to school. The thought didn't occur to me. There were times when we were married there was no reason why I couldn't learn if I'd gone back to college and got my degree. That's really the thing that perturbs me.

Although she declares that she "wasted her time" and that education would have enhanced her life, Rita also states that whe won't enroll in for-credit learning. She says:

> It's not going to change because I can't turn the clock back. I don't feel the need to go back to college now in order to get credit, because my memory isn't what it should be. I would not go for a college degree, nor do I find that my eyesight is that good, so I wouldn't subject myself to the intensive reading and research work that I would have to be involved in. There is no particular reason for going for a degree.
>
> This is a good time in our lives to take individual courses either in the form of education or reading, or Elderhostel--which is great--and just go on from there.

Both Rita and Ben, her husband, have been involved in adult education programs throughout their lives, primarily for curriculum in personal problem-solving:

> I've always taken adult education courses. I suppose it's because I avoided having to do a tremendous amount of research work and taking exams. So, in other words, I pursued whatever courses I found which were interesting to me. For example, when my daughters were teenagers, I had a lot of doubts about the way we wanted them to behave. We were caught up in this transitional position of the family changing and we weren't really prepared for it. A lot of the courses I took in adult education had to do with psychology of family matters--Trying to get answers to my questions.
>
> One time I studied Russian. I studied Spanish--languages were always of interest to me. In other words, I was merely dabbling in courses that I felt would be of interest to me.
>
> I will say one thing: if I sign up for a course, I will always follow it through. I will never abandon it in the middle. . . It's not pressure, but I just feel that we should fill our lives with whatever gives us gratification.

Rita is reflective about her current need for learning and the role of education as a pleasure and a stimulus. In addition, it represents a lost world. Her self analysis touches on a reality for women of her time. She reflected:

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You see, I think I lost identity a long time ago because, if I had utilized my life properly, I would have gotten an education and a better job. I would have been a good business person. Instead, I just worked for people who were constantly drawing more money out of the business than they were earning. One after the other, they went down bankrupt. I would like to have been an accountant. And I felt that there was enough background there, that I had ability, and that if I had gone to school, I would have been able. Of course, a lot of the fault was mine. I should have utilized my time more efficiently. I should have found some way of going to college and I sure could have done that. But I didn't. Of course, I should have done it myself, and I didn't. So that was one of my failings.

I can't turn it back. But I would have liked it different. However, I will say that if I had gone on to school and become a professional, it would have been a very difficult life with my husband because he has a very fragile ego and so, from that point of view, it might have been more gratifying for me, but it would certainly not have been gratifying to him. There's that point to consider.

You know, at 64 there's very little turning back.

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Rita feels that her age is a limiting factor for her expressed wish to pursue education. Personal limits related to gender roles are common to her cohort. For many women of Rita's age and background, identity was derived through family roles. "My husband thought I had quite enough to do at home," said Rita. Although wistful about missed opportunities, she says she does not intend to change. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) found that women learners told similar stories when discussing their family environments. In their tautology of "women's ways of knowing," Rita is a subjectivist, one who listens to her own inner voice. She is attentive to the authoritarian voice of her husband who wishes her company in his retirement. For Rita, educational programs are the means to continue to pursue enjoyable learning activities, and, while a wistful inner voice reminds her of roads not taken, she may not attempt to change her own self assessment.

Harry

Harry was 71-year-old retired businessman at the time of his Elderhostel experience. He began with an overview of his college history and highlighted the meaning of his current education:

> I attended the University of North Carolina from 1936 to 1940 with an interim step at The University of Chicago. I transferred to Chicago for some reason, miscalculated the costs, ran out of money quickly. I went back to work, then hitchhiked back to North Carolina, made up some courses in summer school, and

continued to try to get my degree by 1940. As a result of some misunderstanding on my part and some aggravating discussions I recall with the Dean, I never got my degree although I had an adequate number of credits.

I married in 1940 and did not come back to school to get my degree. I worked for 37 years, most of it in the insurance business operating my own agency.

I was always bothered by the fact that I never had my degree. I had all but the paper but it bothered me on a personal level, a personal achievement level, I guess. In 1977, I completed the work for my degree, 37 years after I had gotten out of college, I got it from the University of M. and I did it on an off-campus basis doing research and papers with a mentor. . . I was retired then.

I worked very closely with the Citizens' Council for Better Schools, so I've had an orientation toward education all of my life. As a matter of fact, I am seriously now considering going on for a master's in the field of American government. I spent perhaps 20 of my working years in politics, holding both elective and appointive office, so I have an interest in that area.

I have done other things from organizing and leading a Great Books Discussion Group for four years, to training in the Great Books Foundation Leadership program. I was always involved in some community work for such things as educational circles. It was really a

personal frustration way down deep inside that I never got that piece of paper and I had kind of a welling joy in me when it arrived in the mail.

Although Harry claimed to find the Elderhostel experience satisfying (It was his third summer with Elderhostel), he continued to reflect on his "dream" of receiving a master's degree. He said:

I can't justify it, because I have no pragmatic use for the degree. I don't intend to go back to teach or I don't intend to use that degree as an entree to a new career or anything that you would normally think of: the only reason I think of in terms of the degree is maybe somewhere in the back of my mind--maybe I spoke too rapidly a moment ago when I said I don't intend a new career--maybe somewhere in the back of my mind there is a fragile hope that something is going within my body that is going to permit me to go back to work and there is nothing that I would like to do more than to teach.

That's been one of my personal frustrations too, because every opportunity I have had to teach in any way--even on the periphery of the teaching profession--I've taken within the insurance field. I've taught accident and health insurance to insurance men, intercompany courses. Even when I was in college, I taught fencing. Great Books was, in a sense even though you were not involved in the actual discussion as a Great Books Discussion Leader, you are involved in an almost teaching situation in that you are guiding other people in their discussion.

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> Way back in the recesses of my mind I say to myself, "Maybe I can teach part time at some college or junior college in my field of interest if there is need for some personnel."
>
> I have always had a very strong desire to continue to learn.

Harry felt that he had developed in cognitive ability and in concentration. He asserted his interest in further education, in pursuing an advanced degree, and in a new (second) career as a teacher. He felt recharged by his week-long Elderhostel experience. Toward the end of the week's stay, he described his capabilities as a learner:

> As a matter of fact, I would say this: I am more confident of my competence now than I've ever been in my life. My life's experience, whatever it has been, has culminated in this sense that "I can do anything that I set out to do at this point in my life." I know I can. It's just a matter of sitting down and doing it. . . .I don't generally look back and say, "What have I done? What have I accomplished?" I want to know what can I do tomorrow.
>
> My attention span is excellent. It never was before. My concentration powers are much greater now than they have ever been in my life. I have a very strong feeling that a lot of this is personal motivation. When I read a book, for example, now, I have no need to know what's going on around me.

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For Harry, late life education is a personal mental gymnasium. By remaining involved in adult learning, he is pursuing a life-dream and creating a cognitive self-maintenance program. Schaie and Willis et al. (1986, 1987) reported results of work with older adults whose cognitive abilities were studied over a 14 year period. They found that, with continued stimulation, abilities either did not decline or were reversed after decline. Harry's drive to concentrate was found primarily in the men of the population: a "use it or lose it" test of endurance into old age. Kaufman (1987) found that older adults created continuous selves. She wrote, "individuals do retain and create a sense of self to the end of their lives" (p. 166).

Beatrice

Beatrice, at 70, was attending her first Elderhostel. A newly retired never-married executive, she did not see herself as old. She cares for her father, now 92: "Now, that is beginning to get up there," she commented in reference to his age. She was eager to discuss the process of class participation:

> Some of us here are in different phases even though our ages, you know, are similar. Because some of us are just out of a work situation and we're going through a transition. Others are pretty well adjusted to retirement and have made some solutions and so forth. So it's difficult. And I think the whole field of concentration is an issue--the ability to concentrate on educational material. Some of the forces that affect your ability to concentrate are new--like the consciousness of time and the lack of time.

You feel the need to select out something that's very significant, whereas, younger people, you know, think they have all the time in the world. They can zero in on a small item of information and learn that thoroughly, and blank out a lot of these conflicting stimuli, whereas, I know I am conscious of the passage of time. And being a little pressured by that, I feel that my concentration isn't as good. Because I don't know where I want to concentrate and what I want to select to do. In the meantime, I am being torn apart in various directions. And I feel I'm not concentrating because I'm aware there are other things. Sometimes I have doubts really, about the value of what I'm learning--because it might be something I'm not going to be sharing. All my life I've been a contributing person. I've shared my knowledge, you know, with people. And here you get to a point where you know that this time of life is for being rather than doing: to celebrate yourself, to do things that you've never done before. You paid your dues and you want to enjoy things. And at the same time you're haunted by the motive, the puritan work ethic that says, "What am I going to do with this? Am I going to earn this stuff to enrich myself to feel, to learn more about the world only to take it to the grave?"--which means I can't share it. You have to make peace with this.

Beatrice echoed Erikson's (1963) stage of generativity v. stagnation, the continued need to produce and to contribute. Her fear of uselessness was mentioned frequently. In fact, Beatrice's anxiety came from a new and somewhat uncomfortable awareness that she was, as an "older person"--"but I'm certainly not, you know"--in a new and stigmatized population. She discoursed at length about her new status. Newly retired, she found her goals uncertain and did not wish to associate herself with economically obsolete "senior citizens." This phenomenon has been well documented in the literature of male development and less discussed in research on older women:

> I think it all diminishes your ego when you come out of a work situation where you've been contributing and you've worked hard. You know our culture is work-oriented and suddenly you have this leisure time. You don't feel a contributor as you have been in the past. And you sort of want to justify your existence to yourself, you know, by continuing something that has a positive impact on other human beings rather than merely indulging yourself in courses and things because you've paid your dues to society and now is the time for you to get back some of it.

However, being among the Elderhostel population buoyed Beatrice's self-worth:

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> I've only been here two or three days, but one of the things that has been very supportive is that you have an increased respect for your peers, listening to the people here. And also the professors' attitudes seem to be very commendable. For ourselves, we don't feel that they're looking at a clinical group, you know--to see what old age people can do. We are accepted as students, just older students. I got one thing out of it: I felt proud of being part of a group. Whereas I just came in skeptically to look around here and I wasn't sure if I want to identify myself with an old age group. You have increasing respect for the dignity of your status.

Beatrice was unsure about how education would fit into her coming years. Certainly, the positive experience of her first Elderhostel dispelled some apprehension and afforded her the opportunity to identify with some of the positive aspects of aging. Her direction was uncertain, and she felt she might find the world of volunteerism or second career more to her liking. She wondered about how to find meaning in late life and how to continue being productive:

> One of the problems is structure. When you have been in a work structure you don't have to think very much. Your thinking is done for you. But when you're faced with a different life style, you have to justify your existence to yourself. You have to make

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> decisions about your life because your life is important. And increasingly more important as you get older because you are so conscious of limitations of time. You feel that time is so important because it is limited and you want to get the most out of that time and feel that you grow.
>
> Sometimes I feel that time is my only enemy.

Conclusion

Understanding older adult learners by hearing about their early life experiences, their concerns for cognitive decrement, their dreams of fulfillment, and their need to contribute and be productive expands educators' knowledge of motivational forces in late life education. Personal stories may provide the context for programmatic and curricular strategies. They are a window into the inner world of learners whose motivations and experiences will shape the future of adult education. In turn, the potential for education to shape meaning for elders is great. Aging brings new integrity, a sense of the full cycle and meaning of life. Older adults do have a significant role to play in the general culture. C. G. Jung wrote, "A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belongs" (1933, p. 109).

This study examined the current Elderhostel experiences of a group of older people (N 40), ages 60 to 80, to explore the personal meaning of education for these adult education participants. The methodological construct (Schutz, 1967) gave description and depth to the study. It afforded insights into the meaning the learners attach

to their experience. For, although individuals were now acting in response to immediate needs (to get out, to keep busy in retirement, to have somewhere to go for a week in July), they were also acting on long-held personal assumptions. (Schutz's "in order to" and "because of" motives.) These assumptions had social and familial roots. Rita's use of education was to resolve pressing social and familial questions; Harry's drive to complete a lifelong task (to have a credential) directed his educational participation. Both had always had respect for education and were wistful about having missed out on earlier opportunities. Yet individual motivation is peculiar to each: At 64, Rita declares her memory is going and she can not take for-credit coursework. At 71, Harry, on the other hand, says his intellectual capacity has never been better, and wishes to earn a master's degree. Beatrice, 70, must grapple with the meaning of age in the culture and sort through her own negative associations in order to find the kind of education that would enable her to contribute Individual needs are deeply reflected in choice and frequency of learning experiences.

Furthermore, the process of phenomenological research can impact the study population. The participants in this study were reflective. They mulled over their family and educational histories, their identities as older people, and their cognitive abilities. Objectivation within the interview sessions allowed them to explore their own feelings about learning. The elders themselves appeared to learn what they were thinking during the interviews. The Elderhostel experience at a university was stimulating and some study participants grew ambitious about further education. In several cases they declared themselves committed to future learning beyond the summer.

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As they described their educational histories and motivations, their own dreams for learning crystallized. This process is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's (1967) assertion that the process of objectivation in interviewing can clarify the interviewee's world for him or herself.

Older learners are complex; the developmental mandate requires that they continue to grow. The quality of their lives can be greatly enhanced through education. It behooves researchers in adult education to explore the potential for learning in this growing segment of the population and to hear the inner reflections of older learners.

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